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A Chechen al-Qaeda?

Caucasian Groups Further Internationalise the Syrian Struggle

Guido Steinberg

In April 2014 government forces defeated a rebel offensive in the north of the Syrian province of Latakia. Although they initially reached the coast, the insurgents were unable to hold their positions there. The rebel forces included many Chechens and other Caucasians, who had previously been seen fighting exclusively in the Caucasus. Their strong presence in Syria is a completely new turn in international jihadism, and a warning to be taken seriously, as many arrive from the Georgian, Turkish and European diasporas rather than from their original home republics. While their goal remains to "liberate" the Caucasus from Russian rule, they are now struggling to topple the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and there is a risk that they will continue terrorist activity after returning to Turkey and Europe. The arrival of the Chechens in Syria makes a joint anti-terrorism strategy with Turkey even more urgent, and forces Western states to cooperate with Russian security agencies.

The issue of Chechens fighting in jihadist movements has been debated for years. While "Chechens" fighting with the Taliban or the Afghan insurgency have featured since the 1990s in the academic literature, media and public discussion, convincing evidence for these claims has never been provided. Russian citizens from the Caucasus have occasionally been detained or killed out of area, but these were never ethnic Chechens. Instead it appears that observers frequently confused Caucasians with Central Asians, especially Uzbeks, who have at times been present in large numbers in Afghanistan and Pakistan and also speak Russian. Until recently, Chechens and other Caucasians have fought almost exclusively to liberate their own region from Russian rule.

That has changed in the past two years. Syria in 2014 has at least four different insurgent formations led by Chechens and composed of Caucasians and other foreign fighters. All belong to the jihadist side of the spectrum and together might account for up to 1,500 fighters. The civil war in Syria therefore stands out as a reorientation of the hitherto strongly nationalist jihadism of the Caucasians, and its increasing integration into the transnational scene.

That impression is confirmed by the conspicuous presence of Chechens in the Syrian fighting. They have been involved in several spectacular and sometimes successful oper-

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ations against government forces. They also appear to possess substantial military experience and frequently train other foreign fighters, including many Europeans. Only their fragmentation prevents them from playing an even larger role.

The Origins of Chechen Jihadism

The jihadists in Chechnya and the North Caucasus are considerably weakened since their heyday between 1995 and 2006, and their activities within Chechnya itself have dwindled since the de facto end of the Second Chechen War (about 2002). Their focus since then has shifted to neighbouring republics where they regularly conducted attacks, although much less frequently after 2010. Since 2007 the jihadists in the region have been led by the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus (or Imarat Kavkaz), but this is no more than a loose alliance of individual local groups (referred to as "jamaat" after the Arabic word for "group"). The strongest and most influential of the jamaat is the Dagestani, which has for years been responsible for attacks on security forces, judges, civil servants, non-militant religious scholars and supposed collaborators, and represents a serious threatens to the republic's internal security. Caucasian jihadists also occasionally conduct deadly headline-grabbing attacks on transport infrastructure (airports, railway stations, trains and buses) outside their home region in Russia proper.

The First Chechen War of 1994–96 was still largely a matter of Chechen nationalists seeking to force Russia to grant their republic independence. But they accepted the assistance of foreign (above all Arab) jihadists, who regarded the struggle in North Caucasus as part of a "holy war" being fought wherever Muslim territory was "occupied" by non-Muslims, and this started to internationalise their struggle. The end of the war saw a power struggle break out between the secular nationalist President Aslan Maskhadov and the Islamists commanded by Shamil Basayev. The latter quickly grew in strength as Basayev worked closely with the foreign fighters who flowed into the republic from 1995, led by the Saudi Thamir al-Suwailim (alias Khattab or Ibn al-Khattab) until his death in 2002. In the years between the two Chechen wars Khattab set up training camps where Chechens and foreign fighters trained together and established the first jihadist groups.

When the Second Chechen War broke out in 1999 the Islamists placed themselves at the forefront of the fighting, and the republic attracted young jihadists from Arab countries, Turkey and Europe. But their numbers remained limited because prior military training was a precondition for joining the fight in the Caucasus. Despite their great professionalism the insurgents quickly came under pressure, and Khattab and numerous other leaders were killed. From 2002 Russian forces succeeded in largely cutting off the rebels' supply and escape routes in the south. Basayev and his supporters responded with devastating attacks within Russia itself. One of the worst was the hostage-taking in the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow in October 2002, where more than 900 hostages were taken and 130 died after the security forces pumped toxic gas into the building before storming it. Even more dramatic was the incident at a school in Beslan in North Ossetia in September 2004, where the insurgents took about 1,100 adults and children hostage. Three hundred of them, mostly children, died when Russian security forces stormed the building.

By 2006 the Chechen uprising had been crushed and Russian forces and their local allies controlled the republic. But by this point the armed struggle had already spread to the neighbouring republics. Initially Ingushetia was most affected, but the focus of jihadist activity lay in Dagestan, where the strongest sub-group of the Emirate still operates today. Doku Umarov (alias Abu Usman) founded and led the "Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus" in an attempt to tighten coordination between independent-

ly operating groups in Chechnya, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria and Ingushetia. Although his influence on the individual groups appears to have been limited, Umarov was nonetheless able to create the outward impression of leading a powerful organisation conducting attacks across the entire Caucasus and even in Russian cities. After Umarov was killed in 2013, the Emirate's leadership appointed its religious thinker and sharia judge, the Dagestani Aliaskhab Kebekov (alias Abu Muhammad), as his successor, but waited months before confirming his death in March 2014, probably because of disagreements over the succession.

Chechens in the Syrian Insurgency

Caucasians have been identifiable participants in the armed struggle against the Assad regime since mid-2012. Their first visible appearance in Aleppo in the summer of 2012 coincided with shifts in the structure of the Syrian rebel movement, whose Islamist currents strengthened during the course of the year. In 2012, jihadist groups in Syria became increasingly powerful and prominent, and numerous foreign fighters entered the country. The Chechens and other Caucasians, like their compatriots from the Arab world and Europe, almost without exception joined the jihadists.

The Syrian insurgency has no central command, operating instead as a conglomerate of at least several dozen notable groups of different size and strength. Despite considerable ideological and strategic differences, changing alliances and frequent splits, for a long time the rebels managed to pursue their shared objective of toppling Assad without serious infighting. Most estimates put the total number of insurgents at 80,000 to 100,000, including at least 8,000 foreigners in early 2014. Others put the number of foreigners at up to 17,000, most of them Arabs. The largest non-Arab group is the Caucasians, who are said to number between several hundred and 1,500.

The Jihadists

The jihadists, whose strength is broadly estimated at 10,000 to 30,000 fighters, comprise only one part of the insurgency, but their influence has expanded since 2012. What sets them apart from all other insurgent organisations is that they treat the war in Syria as only the first step in a larger conflict that would continue after the fall of Assad. They aspire to establish an Islamic state in Syria and carry the armed struggle to neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey, and ultimately attack Israel to "liberate Jerusalem". Over and above those more obvious goals, many jihadists also explicitly want to fight the Assad regime's foreign supporters, of which Russia is second only to Iran. This motive is especially strong among the Caucasian fighters and is one reason for their heavy presence.

Conflict between Nusra Front and ISIS

Although the Caucasians represent a strong contingent, the overwhelming majority of insurgents are Syrians, who are also strongly represented in the jihadist groups. If they wish to operate in Syria, Chechens must therefore join Syrian organisations or work closely together with them. For this reason hostility between the Nusra Front (and other insurgent groups) and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also led to polarisation among the Chechen groups within the country (see SWP Comments 19/2014).

Fighting between the Nusra Front and ISIS broke out at the end of 2013 and quickly affected all their main areas of operations in the north (Aleppo and Idlib), along the Euphrates Valley (Raqqa) and in the east (Deir ez-Zor). Although the Nusra Front and ISIS both emerged out of al-Qaeda in Iraq, their conflict is also ideological. Whereas the Nusra Front cooperated with non-jihadist groups and avoided unnecessary violence, ISIS espoused a very much more radical jihadist ideology and tolerated no deviation from "pure" Salafi-jihadi doctrine. From January 2014 the Islamic Front (an alliance of non-jihadist Islamist and

Salafist groups led by the Free Men of Syria [Ahrar al-Sham]) spearheaded a large-scale offensive that drove many ISIS units back to the east of the country.

Four Chechen Organisations

The conflict between the two leading jihadist currents forced the Chechens to choose one or other, if only because most of the Caucasians operated in the city and province of Aleppo and in Idlib, where the Nusra Front and ISIS were both strong. In summer 2013 the Caucasian forces fragmented into four groups of different sizes. One joined the Nusra Front, another ISIS. The other two remained independent but cooperated closely with the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham.

The Army of Emigrants and Helpers

By far the best-known of the Chechen groups is the Army of Emigrants and Helpers (Jaish al-Muhajirin wa-l-Ansar), which joined forces with ISIS in summer 2013. Its predecessor, called "the emigrants" (al-Muhajirun) or "the emigrant battalion" (Katibat al-Muhajirin), made its first public appearance in September 2012 during fighting in Aleppo. Its leader was Abu Umar al-Shishani (originally Tarkhan Batirashvili), a member of the Chechen-related Kist minority from the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia who remains to this day the best-known Caucasian fighter in Syria.

Abu Umar remained the group's leader when it merged with a number of smaller formations in March 2013 and henceforth operated as Jaysh al-Muhajirin wa al-Ansar (JMA or JAMWA). In the following months the JMA fought with several hundred men largely in the city and province of Aleppo, concentrating on capturing Syrian army bases. Its greatest military success was the capture of the Minnagh air base near Azaz on the Turkish border in August 2013, jointly with ISIS. The assault succeeded after the jihadists blew open one of the entrances with a car bomb. The Chechens and ISIS held the base until the end of February 2014.

It was probably during the course of these events or in the subsequent months that Abu Umar al-Shishani and the JMA joined ISIS. Abu Umar is then reported to have been appointed ISIS's emir for northern Syria, but without any real clarification of the extent of his actual authority over Syrian and Iraqi ISIS commanders there. Consequently, like all ISIS units, Abu Umar's formation also came under attack by the Islamic Front in early 2014 and had to retreat eastward towards Deir ez-Zor. It remains to be seen to what extent the ISIS offensive in neighbouring Iraq in June 2014 will affect the strength of Abu Umar's contingent in Syria. There is some evidence – like a picture of Abu Umar in a Humvee – that the group acquired Iraqi army equipment, which might prompt it to go on the offensive in Syria again.

The JMA Split and the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus

Abu Umar's organisation joining ISIS triggered a sharp conflict among the Chechen fighters in Syria. Salahuddin al-Shishani, an important commander in Abu Umar's force, left in November 2013 to lead a rival group that also used the name Jaish al-Muhajirin wa-l-Ansar, but with the addition of "Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus".

As the reason for the split, Salahuddin cited the incompatibility of the oath of loyalty to ISIS with his earlier oath to the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus and its leader Doku Umarov. Umarov had initially been very sceptical about the Caucasian presence in Syria because he thought they should be fighting in their own countries. But in the course of spring 2013 Umarov accepted that his resistance was futile and revised his position. As a result, the Caucasus Emirate websites started to celebrate the Caucasian contribution in Syria and Umarov appointed JMA commander Salahuddin al-Shishani to represent the Emirate in Syria. In this way, Umarov and the

Islamic Emirate plainly hoped to preserve their control over at least one section of the Chechen fighters in Syria.

All that is known about Salahuddin al-Shishani is that like most probably all four leaders of the Chechen groups he is a Kist from the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia. He is said to command several hundred fighters and in early 2014 was operating in the villages north of Aleppo. The JMA–Islamic Emirate cooperated closely with the Nusra Front in fighting against regime forces, but refused to join operations against ISIS on the grounds that they had not come to Syria to fight against "Muslims" (a distinction based on the ideological belief that all their other enemies in Syria were apostates or unbelievers). Nonetheless, the fighting between ISIS and its insurgent rivals caused great uncertainty within the JMA. A number of reports suggest that some of its members broke away in 2014 to join Abu Umar's group in ISIS.

The Saifullah Group in the Nusra Front

The second split from Abu Umar's JMA was the group led by Saifullah al-Shishani (originally Ruslan Machalikashvili), which joined forces with the Nusra Front at the end of 2013.

Saifullah, also a Kist, left the Pankisi Gorge and Georgia for Turkey in 2001 or 2002. He is reported to have been involved in criminal activities in both countries. After arriving in Syria in late 2012 or early 2013 he joined Abu Umar's Muhajirin, where he quickly moved through the ranks of the organization to become Umar's right hand man, as reflected by his prominence in JMA videos.

In July/August 2013 Saifullah fell out with Abu Umar and left the JMA with several dozen followers. The main reason for the conflict was a power struggle between the two ambitious leaders, but Saifullah is also said to have protested against the extreme brutality of the new ally ISIS. Saifullah appears to have pulled back westwards from the Aleppo area towards the Turkish border, where in the following months he operated jointly with the fourth Chechen group, the Soldiers of Syria (Junud al-Sham). In November or December 2013 Saifullah swore allegiance to the Nusra Front, but without renouncing his close cooperation with Junud al-Sham. On 6 February 2014, an attempt by the Islamic Front, the Nusra Front and their two allied Chechen groups to storm Aleppo's central prison was repulsed by government forces. Saifullah was killed in the fighting. In February 2014 his successor Mohammed Khorasani confirmed the group's allegiance to the Nusra Front.

The Soldiers of Syria (Junud al-Sham)

Junud al-Sham is the only Chechen group that has been able to maintain its independence, despite frequently cooperating with Nusra and the Islamic Front. It owes its reputation largely to its leader Muslim Abu Walid (originally Muslim Margoshvili).

Muslim Abu Walid stands out among Chechen commanders because he served as a leader under the legendary jihadist field commander Khattab in the Second Chechen War in the early 2000s. That he is not the uncontested leader of the Syrian Chechens despite that record could be connected to his spell in prison in Russia between 2003 and 2005. His unusually quick release awakened suspicions in jihadist circles that he might have done a deal with the authorities. While that cannot be ruled out, he subsequently rejoined the jihadists fighting in Dagestan.

Muslim always wanted to operate in the North Caucasus, and from 2009 made repeated efforts to find a way from Georgia to Chechnya. Only after all his efforts failed did he decide to go to Syria after the uprising began there. Junud al-Sham's headquarters and area of operations are in the north of the coastal province of Latakia, in the mountains near the Turkish border. In August 2013 the group joined an offensive against Alawi villages in the coastal mountains, but their assault was repulsed. In

spring 2014 the insurgents made another attempt to penetrate the Alawi heartland and reach the coast – operating from Turkish territory according to press reports. In the interim Muslim and his fighters were also frequently in Aleppo and its northern surroundings, where Junud al-Sham took part in the early February assault on the prison in Aleppo.

Junud al-Sham is not a large group, with the number of fighters probably not exceeding the low hundreds. But there is evidence that they – like the other Chechens – are especially well-trained. The Chechens (and Uzbeks) enjoy a well-deserved reputation as the elite forces of the jihadist movement, because their first generation served in the Red Army and their fighters can draw on long experience in guerrilla warfare.

A European Problem

The Chechens in Syria represent a domestic security problem in Europe and Turkey, because many of the fighters in the four groups originate from the diaspora. Considerable numbers of those now in Syria come from Georgia and Turkey, but there are also dozens from Austria and France and rather fewer from Belgium, Scandinavia and Germany.

The numbers of Chechens in Europe have grown substantially in recent years, in particular in the aftermath of the Chechen wars. In certain countries these diaspora communities represent important recruitment pools for jihadist groups. The biggest problem appears to exist in Austria, as more than half of the about 100 fighters from that country in Syria are Chechen in origin. From France about 80 young Caucasian men are reported to have travelled to Syria, while the figures for Belgium and Scandinavia appear to be smaller. In Germany only isolated cases have been reported to date, but the true figure could be higher given that the Chechen jihadist scene in Berlin is substantial and high-profile. Because the volunteers join highly trained Caucasian groups in Syria, it must be assumed that – if they survive – they will return with profound knowledge of guerrilla warfare and terrorist methods. Theoretically this poses the greatest danger to Russia, because "liberating" the Caucasus from Russian rule is the uppermost objective for all Caucasian fighters. But since 2002 the Russian Federation has been very successful in restricting the influx of foreign fighters back home to the Caucasus or elsewhere in its territory. So it must be feared that most returnees will travel to Turkey and their European countries of residence.

The Syrian conflict also appears to be leading the Caucasians to establish new and closer transnational contacts, as the Arab fighters in Afghanistan did in the 1980s. There are numerous indications that the Chechen groups in Syria are training other foreigners, including Germans of different ethnic origins. The latter are following a long tradition of sympathy for Chechnya among German jihadists. Mohammed Atta's Hamburg cell that supplied three of the four pilots for the 9/11 attacks in 2001 initially intended to go and fight in Chechnya rather than join al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The multicultural centre in Neu-Ulm, some of whose users went to fight in the Caucasus, became the institutional centre of enthusiasm for the Chechen cause in Germany. Two members of the Sauerland group jailed for a plot to attack the US airbase at Ramstein originated from this milieu. They initially attempted to go to Chechnya, gave up because they lacked the necessary military training, instead travelled to Pakistan and later attempted to carry out an attack in Germany.

This longstanding tradition continues to this day. The first indication of close contacts between German jihadists and Chechens in Syria was supplied by Denis Cuspert, a rapper from Berlin who converted to Islam and travelled to Syria to join the insurgency. In December 2012 he released a video containing a jihad hymn (nasheed) entitled "Chichan" (Chechnya), describing the Chechen jihadists as models to be supported. At this point he may already have

been in contact with Junud al-Sham in Syria, with whom he probably trained.

It is still not properly clear what new alliances are being forged in Syria, but the historical parallels to Afghanistan are unmistakable. There, in the 1980s, far from home, Arabs from across the Middle East met and established the transnational ties that ultimately led to the emergence of al-Qaeda. In Syria a similar process is under way, but this time there are about two thousand Europeans and hundreds of Turks among the foreign fighters.

Counter-measures

When it comes to countering the Chechen jihadists, the same issues apply as for the European jihadists: without the full cooperation of the Turkish political leadership and security authorities it will be difficult for Europe to protect itself from the potential danger. But in a throwback to its past policy in the Chechen conflict, Turkey tolerates the activities of Islamist terrorists on its territory. In the 1990s and early 2000s it turned a blind eye to foreign fighters moving through its territory to the Caucasus and failed to respond when several hundred Turks joined the fighting against the Russians. Although Ankara renounced that policy in 2004/2005, it is doing the same again today with respect to Syria. Chechen groups use Turkey as a rear base and receive support from the Chechen diaspora there without state interference. The Turkish government apparently believes it can instrumentalise jihadist groups for its own purposes, such as toppling Assad and suppressing Syrian Kurdish currents close to the PKK.

Ankara's support for Chechen and other foreign jihadists, despite clear warnings from its European partners, endangers internal security within Turkey itself and in Europe. Germany and Europe must therefore work to convince the Turkish political leadership to refrain from aiding terrorist organisations and to improve cooperation with European partners.

More broadly, European governments and security agencies must prepare for the dangers presented by the Chechen groups in Syria and their European friends. The Chechen diaspora is still a largely unknown phenomenon in Europe and the fragmentation of the groups in Syria makes it still harder to adequately assess the threat. In order to identify possible dangers at an early stage, for example, speakers of the numerous and difficult Caucasian languages must be recruited. That may sound a banal recommendation, but it is key when one considers the problems European security agencies (and armed forces) experience with much more widely spoken languages like Uzbek, Pashto and Urdu. A more effective sharing of tasks within Europe would be pertinent.

Difficult decisions will also have to be made about which governments, police forces and intelligence services to seek cooperation with, and to what extent. In the first place this means Russia, whose agencies have always been awkward partners but are the only ones with long experience in combating Caucasian militancy. Indeed, while not attempting to offer an excuse for its unscrupulous Syria policy, Moscow was undeniably aware of the emerging problem in Syria much earlier than Western governments. Therefore, while it would be remiss to exclude all and any cooperation with Moscow, the bounds should be tightly drawn. On the other hand, there must be no cooperation with the regime of Bashar al-Assad, however long he may survive. If Europe wishes to retain a last shred of credibility on Syria, after all that has happened during the past three years, overtures to Damascus are out of the question.

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